

## HEPATITIS C

### **What is hepatitis C?**

Hepatitis C is a liver disease caused by the hepatitis C virus (HCV), which is found in the blood of persons who have this infection. The infection is spread by contact with the blood or body secretions of an infected person.

### **How serious is hepatitis C?**

Hepatitis C is serious for some persons, but not for others. Most persons who get hepatitis C carry the virus for many years. Most of these persons have some liver damage but many do not feel sick. Some persons with liver damage due to hepatitis C may develop cirrhosis (scarring) of the liver and liver failure, which may take many years to develop. Some even go on to develop liver cancer. Others have little long-term effects.

### **What can I do now that my hepatitis C test is positive?**

Contact your doctor. Additional tests may be needed to confirm your diagnosis, to see if you have liver damage, and for consideration of treatment. Additionally, if confirmed, you should be counseled on ways to prevent spreading HCV to others (see below).

### **What if I don't feel sick?**

Many persons with long-term hepatitis C have no symptoms and feel well, but should still see their doctor for evaluation and follow-up. For some persons, the most common symptom is extreme tiredness.

### **How can I take care of my liver?**

- See your doctor regularly.
- Do not drink alcohol as this can speed up liver damage.
- Tell your doctor about all medicines that you are taking, even over the counter and herbal medicines.
- If you have liver damage from hepatitis C, you should get vaccinated against hepatitis A and B (unless you have already been infected by these viruses).

### **Is there a treatment for hepatitis C?**

Drugs are licensed for the treatment of selected persons with hepatitis C. The recent advances in treatment are effective in about half of those who complete the treatment. You should check with your doctor to see if treatment would be appropriate.

### **Is there a vaccine for hepatitis C?**

Currently, there is no vaccine to prevent hepatitis C.

**How could I have gotten hepatitis C?**

HCV is spread primarily by exposure to infected human blood or body secretions. You may have gotten hepatitis C if:

- you **ever** injected street drugs and shared needles, even if you experimented only a few times many years ago.
- you were treated for blood clotting problems with a blood product made before 1987.
- you received a blood transfusion or solid organ transplant (e.g., kidney, liver, heart) from an infected donor.
- you were ever on long-term kidney dialysis.
- you were ever a health care worker and had frequent contact with blood in the work place, especially by accidental needlesticks.
- your mother had hepatitis C when she gave birth to you.
- you ever had sex with a person infected with HCV.
- you lived with someone who was infected with HCV and shared items such as razors or toothbrushes that might have had blood on them.

**How can I prevent spreading HCV to others?**

- Do not donate your blood, body organs, other tissue, or sperm.
- Do not share toothbrushes, razors, or other personal care articles that might have your blood on them.
- Cover your cuts and open sores.
- If you have one long-term, steady sex partner, there is a small chance of transmitting HCV to that partner. If you want to lower the small chance of spreading HCV to your sex partner, you could use latex condoms. Ask your doctor about having your sex partner tested.

**What if I am pregnant?**

Five out of every 100 infants born to HCV infected women become infected. This occurs at birth, and there is no current treatment that can prevent this from happening. However, infants infected with HCV at birth seem to do well in the first few years of life. More studies are needed to find out if these infants will have problems from the infection as they grow older.

**Hepatitis C is NOT spread by:**

- breast feeding
- sneezing
- hugging
- coughing
- sharing of eating utensils, or drinking glasses, food, or water
- casual contact

**Persons should NOT be excluded from work, school, play, child-care or other social settings on the basis of their HCV infection status alone.**

**If you use or inject street drugs:**

- Stop and get into a drug treatment program.
- If you cannot stop, do not reuse or share needles, syringes or equipment.
- Get vaccinated against hepatitis A and hepatitis B (unless you have already been infected by these viruses).

**If you are having sex, but not with one steady partner:**

You and your partners can transmit infections to each other through sex, including the agents that cause AIDS, hepatitis B, hepatitis C, gonorrhea or chlamydia. Use latex condoms every time.

**Where can I find more information on hepatitis C?**

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention has information available at their website <http://www.cdc.gov/ncidod/diseases/hepatitis/c/index.htm>.